

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

HAILED BY MANY AT HOME AND ABROAD AS INDIA'S RENAISSANCE MAN

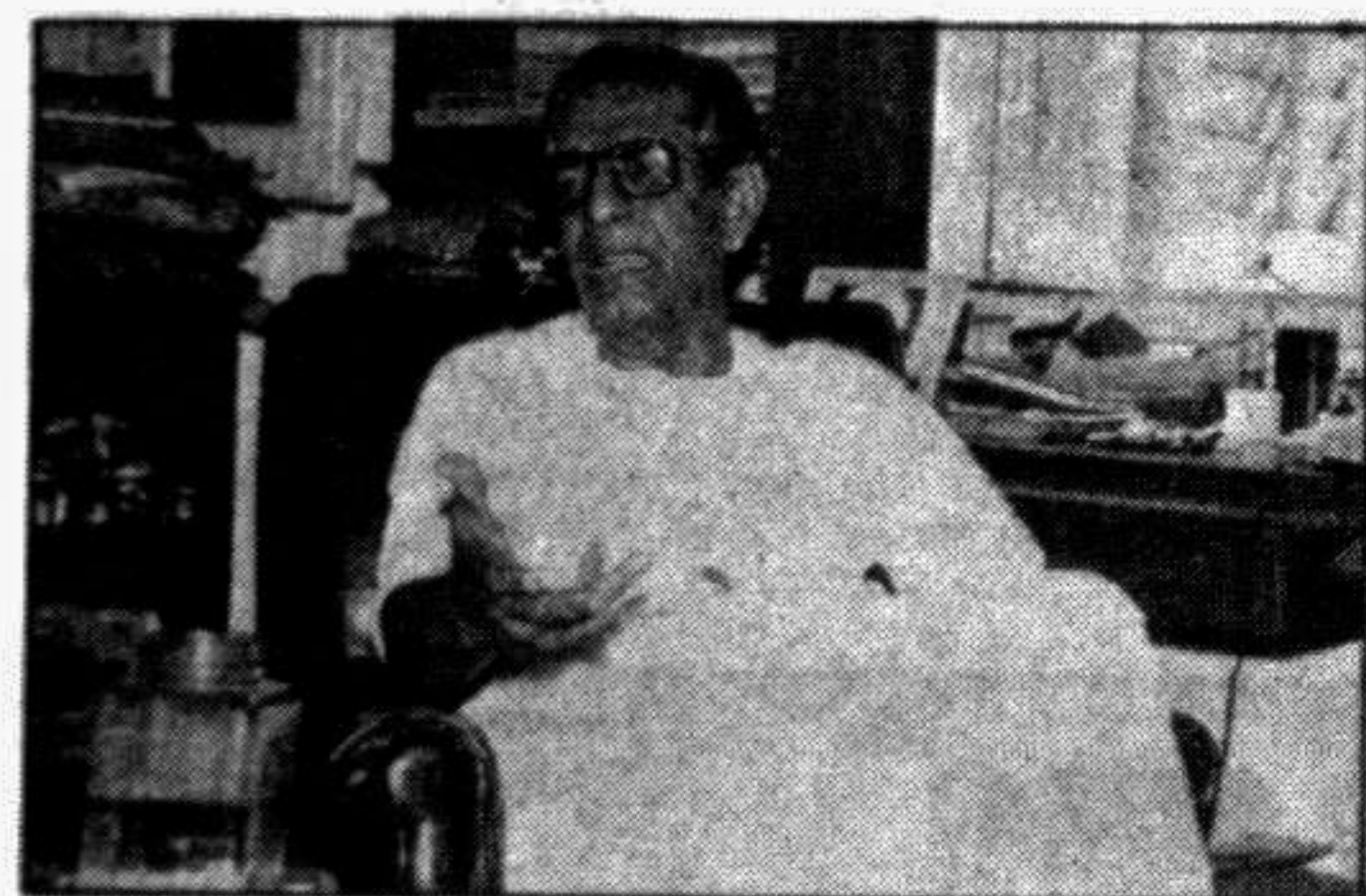
A DAY WITH SATYAJIT RAY

by Dheera Sujan
Special to the Star

Over the years, Ray's vision has become darker, more despairing ... and his films, always striving for truth, have changed too, like Calcutta, the city he lives in.

but Ray is quite a shy man, and prefers the role of auteur to actor.

A heart attack followed by a couple of major heart operations has slowed him down a bit, and placed a few restrictions on his out-



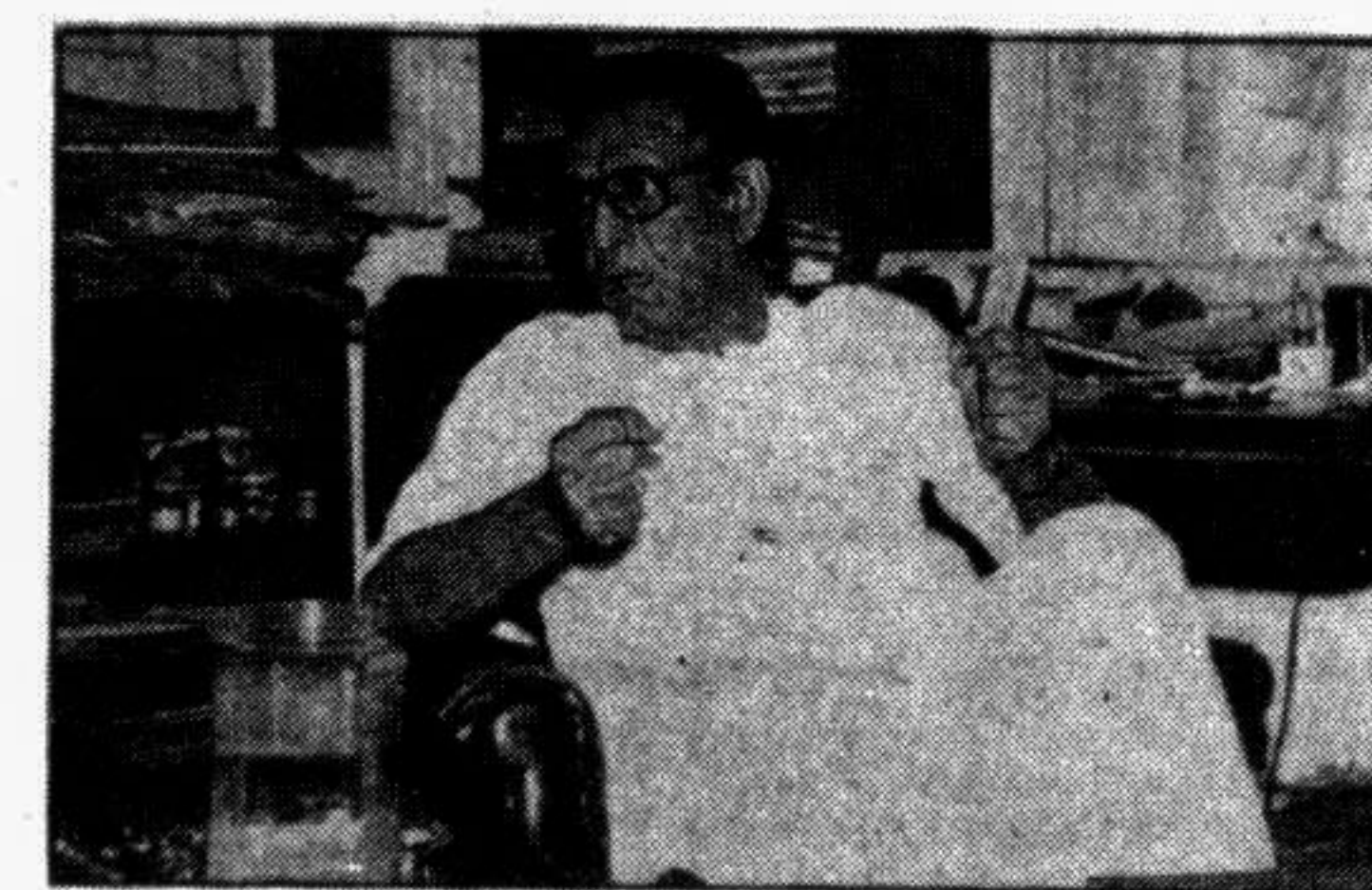
doors activities, but his son Sandeep acts as his second pair of legs, and Satyajit Ray is still very much in the driver's seat.

He lives in a crumbling old house in the old city which he refuses to leave. The sounds of Calcutta — incessant traffic noises, the calls of peanut sellers, and the cries from neighbouring apartments — drift in through the large open windows of the front room cum study which is crammed with the tools of several artistic trades.

Books, books and more books are everywhere, jamming the huge bookshelves along the walls, on top of tables, and under them;

Bertrand Russel to Arthur C. Clarke. Bengali magazines, and completed works in old hardback sets. Children's stories and learned volumes on art, science, films. Not one of them looks new or untouched. Dogeared files full of papers (reminiscent of the musty piles seen in the offices of railway station clerks) lie on every table surface. A huge box of used artists' crayons and pencils stand on a side table.

On the piano he used to use while composing his scores, sits a bust of Beethoven, next to some of his film trophies. The piles of cassettes in the corner show an eclectic taste —



Indian ragas to Mozart quintets — Ray's knowledge of western art, especially music, is immense.

"A film is like a piece of Western classical music in the period of Mozart to Beethoven" he says. "They both have a formal structure and they both have to finish at a particular time — Indian classical music isn't like that at all. It's improvised and free flowing."

Some of his films contain passages and dialogues with three or four voices; listen to a Mozart opera, and you'll notice a similarity in form. Charulata (1964), the film he regards as his best, is a prime example of this structured

musical form.

Perhaps it is this structure, this formalism, hidden by the superficial coverings of story, dialogue, action, which have made his films so palatable to the educated Western taste.

"Film is essentially a Western medium" he says. Ray, who started off his career as a graphic artist, learnt about films by spending hours in darkened cinemas watching and studying the films and the techniques of the early greats like D.W. Griffiths and Eisenstein, and later, Renoir and Ford, Capra and De Sica.

In fact, it was after watching De Sica's Bicycle



Thieves, a film that moved him deeply, that Ray resolved to make a film using similar naturalistic techniques, but set in an Indian framework. The much loved Bengali novel, Pather Panchali, provided him with the perfect material.

Since his earliest films, Ray has had a very strong appeal to the West. In Europe, the USA and Japan, he's revered as a cinematic great, along with names such as Bergman, Kurosawa, and Renoir. "In Azerbaijan, there's a film club named after me—the Satyajit Ray Film Society" he says with a slightly surprised raise of the eyebrows. He's been honoured

in just about every international film festival worth its salt.

Critics say the reason for this connection with the West by an artist who remains essentially Indian in the universality of his

themes—love, greed, innocence and its inevitable corruption—large themes, yet all drawn by a hand that excels in the miniature.

The camera lingers on a train in the distance connecting the outside world with a forgotten village where the cycle of birth, life and death continue unheeded. A girl, frail of body, but exuberant of spirit dances in the rain that will be the cause of her death. A young man who's spent his life writing his novel learns it means nothing after the death of his beloved, and hollow-eyed, he offers the pages to the wind ... It was images like these in Ray's great trilogy, The World of

Apu that established his reputation, not only as a good craftsman, but also a humanist visionary.

However, over the years, Ray's vision, which began like his country's, with such hope for the future, has become darker, more despairing. He started his career in Calcutta, but the Calcutta of today is a vastly changed world, and Ray's films, always striving for truth, have changed too.

Hope has given way to resignation, just as the main character of The Middle Man (1975) gave way to corruption. His film, Deliverance (1981) was a cry of anger against the cruelties inflicted on those on the lowest rung of the caste ladder.

"Our treatment of the untouchables is a blot on our history, and in this film, there was no scope for even a ray of optimism," he says. Deliverance is very bleak, but it speaks the truth."

Ray's refusal to overtly involve himself in politics has sometimes been criticized, especially when Calcutta was almost torn apart by the violence of the 70's. But the criticism is somewhat unfair. His films, more often than not, have been social comments on a society he knows intimately.

In a world increasingly giving way to corruption, both moral and physical, Ray remains essentially optimistic, with few regrets for things left undone. "I've has a remarkable good life" he says. "I've managed to do just about everything I'd set out to do."

Years ago, Ray had wanted to make a film of the great Hindu epic The Mahabharata, but after researching the subject, de-

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KAPUSCINSKI : 30 YEARS OF ABSURDITIES OF POWER AND WAR

Ryszard Kapuscinski is a writer who touches the heart of the matter. He has survived 30 coups and escaped death in the most bizarre circumstances but his interest is not in death and bloodshed but in the structure of power and the nature of the men and women who suffer. In his most famous book he wrote about the court of Ethiopia's feudal ruler Emperor Haile Selassie. Gemini News Service caught up with him at a festival in Holland. By Fred de Vries



KAPUSCINSKI
Witness to the absurdity of war

a young and independent Africa.

But slowly the hangover crept in. The freedom struggle in Angola developed into 15 years of civil war; Uganda experienced bloodbath after bloodbath; and civil wars continue unabated. Is there still hope for the Lost Continent?

There is a lot of pessimism about the future of Africa, which I understand very well. There was a lot of naive optimism at the beginning of the process of independence.

All of us thought it's enough to be politically independent to get decent economical and social life. The people expected the next day they would wake up in the independent state and everything would become marvellous, possibilities of having a life in western Europe.

He is sad: "Africa has a lot of its own dynamism, and the question is to find out the formula to describe the culture of Africa. Because our limitation is that we look at everything with European eyes, and we put to everything the European measures."

During his career, tyrants made way for other tyrants. The process was immaculately described in his most famous book The Emperor, about the court of Ethiopia's feudal ruler Haile Selassie. It is the first part of a trilogy. The Persian Shah followed in the Shah of Shahs, and Idi Amin is to be added later this year.

Fred de Vries is a Dutch journalist who freelanced for Uganda for several years for Radio Netherlands and a variety of other publications. He is currently based in Amsterdam.

The End of a Decade — and Then We Move on

As we walk back along the dimly-lit memory lane, this writer is certain to stumble a lot, almost to the point of giving up the whole exercise. But there are recollections — and faces — which can no longer be committed to oblivion.

My persistence is based on a couple of solid reasons. This column is written essentially for the younger Star readers, among whom we count some of our favourite nephews and nieces to whom the time often covered in this column belongs to another time and another place. True, there are a few good memoirs, especially by politicians, written mostly about themselves, often more eloquently than truthfully, without capturing the sound and smell, the noise and dirt of the time they lived in.

So, we are left with enormous gaps in our contemporary history.

This writer had an unexpected and unique chance of bringing up the subject with Sardar Swaran Singh, a former Indian cabinet minister — a position he probably held for over three decades — when he visited Kuala Lumpur in late 1987 in his capacity as the Member of the UNESCO Executive Board. Thank God, our non-stop conversation was more about our sub-continent, its past, present and future, than about the United Nations.

We talked about our Liberation War when Sardar Sahib — as this writer addressed him — was his country's Foreign Minister, about Khalistan, about the late Pandit Nehru ("Oh, how he hated dhobi which he regarded as an ungainly outfit for a man) and even about Nelson Mandela whom Singh had just met, as a member of the Commonwealth Observer team, in a South African prison. ("No one ever reminded me more of Gandhi than Mandela.")

It was quite beyond the capacity of this writer to persuade the 82-year statesman to write his memoirs, even a couple of long chapters on our Liberation War as seen from inside the Indian Government. All he agreed to do, somewhat reluctantly, was to welcome me at his home in Punjab and to talk to me on our contemporary scene. Yes, I will take him up on his offer, before this writer is "old and grey and full of sleep."

How fascinating it will be to listen to Sardar Sahib about Bangladesh. For instance, he once said, "All, your country

has such insurmountable problems. What surprises me is what a lot of people are so desperate to come to power and some are so sure of solving your problems." And then he asked for the number of political parties in the country, a question I could not then answer.

ONE other reason for imposing this column on my readers is that, through generations, the family of this writer has earned the dubious distinction of being reasonably good raconteurs, which we probably share with lots of others in Bangladesh. A distinction? I wonder. It is said that in the olden days, back in the thirties, it was virtually impossible for anyone to pass by the road in front of our ancestral home at Mouli Bazar it my grandfather was sitting out on the verandah. The passerby would be called in — not invited — for a chat, often a long one. Depending on my grandpa's mood, the visitor would either get a cup of tea or receive a rebuke for not wearing a headgear. This would then give my grandpa the excuse for relating some stories, mostly about his children living in faraway places.

In one form or another, the tradition survived, as it probably did in so many other families. But will it continue much longer? I wonder. When my good first cousin, Abdul Qadir passed away late last year, rather prematurely, in his mid-sixties, who was known to most people here as a retired civil servant, with a distinguished career, we lost perhaps one of the last raconteurs of the family. Qadir — or Moni Bhai as we called him — could turn any conversation into an exercise in wit and humour, punctuated by smiles and laughter, but it would be always free from any malice and bad taste. During one of my last meetings with him a year earlier, I presented him with a pen which he studied carefully, affectionately, and then asked, as if speaking to himself, "What should I do with a pen?"

"Isn't it much more fun talking?" he queried. He was probably right.

HOWEVER, back in our university days in the late forties, we were given no excuse for staying away from serious writing, whatever we could come up with. Two teachers who were

primarily responsible for putting us on the track were Shaheed Jyotirmoy Guha-Thakurta and the late AG Stock.

In the days when we studied under him, Prof Guha-Thakurta was just a good teacher, friendly, articulate and highly knowledgeable. Now, after some four decades, he appears to me in a different light, not just because of the martyrdom he embraced in 1971 but due to the way he exercised some quiet subtle influence on our intellectual life, rather unobtrusively, without much of a push or drive.

Many of us then belonged to what was loosely called the Left movement. In reality, barring a few exceptions, we were living in a half-way house. The 1948 upsurge over the language

organised by a visiting Quaker team. Never numbering more than 25 to 30, we would sit on the floor, discussing issues ranging from literature to politics, listening to our European visitors, all dressed in pyjama and kurta, talking about the philosophy of MN Roy. Or was it part of the Congress for Cultural Freedom which, by then, had already established its base in Calcutta? Or did it have anything to do with the Moral Rearmament which, despite all the confusion surrounding it, had started its recruitment in Europe?

Whatever we learnt or unlearnt from these meetings, we produced a venture, a quarterly Bengali journal, a brainchild of Prof Guha-Thakurta. In keeping with the philosophy of Radical Humanism, the

she once told some of us, was whether we could maintain our freedom of thinking and look out at the wide intellectual horizon, without losing our individual identities.

The contribution of Ms Stock to our intellectual life was undoubtedly more academic than political, but at times incredibly innovative.

She had a way of picking up subjects for tutorials for her students which would get us all very excited, perhaps because they often brought out some of our own innermost thinking. Not surprisingly, therefore, I was asked to do a 2000-word piece on the "Elements of Class Struggle in Shakespeare's Coriolanus", while several others, including Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, worked on English war poetry in the twentieth century. After all these years, I still feel puzzled why I was tied down to class struggle in one single Shakespearean play, while Siddiqui was given the freedom to cover the whole range of war poetry. Well, as the saying goes, the teacher knows best.

Thus, we reached the end of the forties, and stood at the threshold of a new decade that was to see the climax of the Language Movement in the Ekushey February, the fall of the Muslim League government, the rise of Awami League and its leaders (including Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) and the imposition of the first military dictatorship on the country, under General Ayub.

Then, I was on the move, and so were a few of other contemporaries. It was also the time for budding poets, like Hassan Hafizur Rahman, Alauddin Al Azad, Sayyid Atiqullah and Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir, to join the ranks of established ones like Abul Hussain, Ahsan Habib, Farrukh Ahmed and Ashraf Siddiqui. This was when Shamsur Rahman, still then seemingly a little unsure of his talent, wrote a moving poem on Krishnachandra flowers being in bloom which I learnt by heart. Some three decades later, I recited it during a luncheon gathering at the residence of Zillur. Shamsur listened to it with a show of politeness, but, believe it or not, disclaimed its authorship. Did I then write the poem myself? I wonder. Who can say what happened four decades ago?

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali



Shaheed Jyotirmoy Guha-Thakurta

Issue had shattered our hopes about our place in Pakistan — our faith in the Two-Nation Theory was virtually dead and gone — but we had discovered no new faith. It was fashionable to be left, but difficult to be a Marxist without undertaking a sustained study which few of us were capable of. The local British Information Services then distributed copies of the book, "The God that Failed" among university students and journalists here just to alert them of the danger of having anything to do with Communism.

A Radical Humanist by conviction, so we were told, Guha-Thakurta did not offer us a new God to worship. Instead, he took us to small meetings, some held in a house close to the Azad newspaper office, or

IF Ryszard Kapuscinski were in Baghdad now, he would not be reporting on the carpet bombing, the bomb waves and the largest fireworks in history. Instead he would describe the deafening silence between bombardments from some shack in a lower class Baghdad suburb.

The 58-year old Polish journalist and writer does not go in for gang-bro journalism. Instead he ventures into the world of the common man where human stories lie hidden. In prose he describes the absurdities of war and power.

To depict plain Ugandan tyranny of Idi Amin he didn't use the well-known example of Amin feeding people to the crocodiles, but wrote the account of a lonely Christmas in Kampala together with a sickly servant.

Kapuscinski's writing touches the heart of the matter. It's as if the smell of sweat from the feverish servant rises from the pages.

And then there is the confusion of war. In his report for the New York Times supplement about the Ugandan rebellion, Kapuscinski tells how his convey lands in an ambush only to find a bunch of ragged rebels ready to surrender. Eventually they do not surrender. Time after time one question comes to mind: what moves this man?

The occasion to ask him came when Kapuscinski visited Holland for the Story International, a story telling festival held from January 15-20.

"It's always to do with what every writer has to do: to fight his idealistic fight," he explains. "His obligation is to show the truth, to try to convince the people of the absurdity, of the tragedy of war."

"But we have to be aware of our limitations. The only thing is to show the truth, to tell the truth and to hope that some people somehow, maybe not